TALES OF WAR AND PEACE — By RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

THE LONG ARM

THE safe was an old one that opened with a key. As adjutant, Capt. Swanson had charge of certain funds of the regiment and kept in the safe about $5,000. No one but himself and Rueff, his first sergeant, had access to it. And as Rueff proved an alibi, the money might have been removed by an outsider. The court-martial gave Swanson the benefit of the doubt, and a reprimand for not taking greater care of the keys, and Swanson made good the $5,000.

Swanson did not think it was a burglar who had robbed the safe. He thought Rueff had robbed it, but he could not possibly prove that. At the time of the robbery Rueff was outside the Presidio, in uniform, at a moving-picture show in San Francisco. A dozen people saw him there. Besides, Rueff held an excellent record. He was a silent, clerk-like young man, better at "paper work" than campaigning, but even as a soldier he had never come upon the books. And he had seen service in two campaigns, and was supposed to cherish ambitions toward a commission. But, as he kept much to himself, his fellow non-coms could only guess that.

On his captain's account he was loyally distressed over the court-martial, and in his testimony tried to shield Swanson, by agreeing heartily that through his own carelessness the keys might have fallen into the hands of some one outside the post. But his loyalty could not save his superior officer from what was a verdict virtually of "not proven."

It was a most distressing affair, and, on account of the social prominence of Swanson's people, his own popularity, and the name he had made at Batangas and in the Boxer business, was much commented upon, not only in the services, but by the newspapers all over the United States.

Every one who knew Swanson knew the court-martial was only a matter of form. Even his enemies ventured only to suggest that overnight he might have borrowed the money, meaning to replace it the next morning. And the only reason for considering this explanation was that Swanson was known to be in debt. For he was a persistent gambler. Just as at Pekin he had gambled with death for his number, in times of peace he gambled for money. It was always his own money.

From the start Swanson's own attitude toward the affair was one of blind, unreasoning rage. In it he saw no necessary routine of discipline, only crass, ignorant stupidity. That any one should suspect him was so preposterous, so unintelligent, as to be nearly comic. And when, instantly, he demanded a court of inquiry, he could not believe it when he was summoned before a court-martial. It sickened, wounded, deeply affronted him; turned him quite savage.

On the stand his attitude and answers were so insolent that his old friend and classmate, Capt. Copley, who was acting as his counsel, would gladly have kicked him. The findings of the court-martial, that neither cleared nor condemned, and the reprimand, were an intolerable insult to his feelings, and, in a fit of bitter disgust with the service and every one in it, Swanson resigned. Of course, the moment he had done so he was sorry. Swanson's thought was that he could no longer associate with any one who could believe him capable of theft. It was his idea of showing his own opinion of himself and the army.

But no one saw it in that light. On the contrary, people said: "Swanson has been allowed to resign." In the army, voluntary resigning and being "allowed to resign" lest greater evils befall, are two different things. And when it was too late no one more than Swanson saw that more clearly. His anger gave way to extreme morbidness. He believed that in resigning he had assured every one of his guilt. In every friend and stranger he saw a man who doubted him. He imagined snubs, rebuffs, and coldnesses. His morbidness fastened upon his mind like a parasite upon a tree, and the brain sickened. When men and women glanced at his alert, well-set-up figure and shoulders, that even when he wore "cits" seemed to support epaulets, and smiled approvingly, Swanson thought they sneered. In a week he longed to be back in the army with a homesickness that made every one who belonged to it his enemy.

He left San Francisco, where he was known to all, and traveled south through Texas, and then to New Orleans and Florida. He never could recall this period with clearness. He remembered changing from one train to another, from one hotel to the next. Nothing impressed itself upon him. For what he had lost nothing could give consolation. Without honor life held on charm. And he believed that in the eyes of all men he was a thief, a pariah, and an outcast.

He had been in Cuba with the Army of Occupation, and of that beautiful island had grown foolishly fond. He was familiar with every part of it, and he believed in one or another of its pretty ports he could so completely hide himself that no one could intrude upon his misery. In the States, in the newspapers he seemed to read only of those places and friends and associates he most loved. In the little Cuban village in which he would bury himself he would cut himself off from all newspapers, from all who knew him; from those who had been his friends, and those who knew his name only to connect it with a scandal.

On his way from Port Tampa to Cuba the boat stopped at Key West, and for the hour in which she discharged cargo Swanson went ashore and wandered aimlessly. The little town, reared on a flat island of coral and limestone, did not long detain him. The main street of shops, eating houses, and saloons, the pretty residences with overhanging balconies, set among gardens and magnolia trees, were soon explored, and he was returning to the boat when the martial music of a band caused him to halt. A side street led to a great gateway surmounted by an anchor. Beyond it Swanson saw lawns of well-kept grass, regular paths, pretty cottages, the two-starred flag of an admiral, and, rising high above these, like four Eiffel towers, the gigantic masts of a wireless. He recognized that he was at the entrance to the Key West naval station, and turned quickly away.

He walked a few feet, the music of the band still in his ears. In an hour he would be steaming toward Cuba, and, should he hold to his present purpose, in many years this would be the last time he would stand on American soil, would see the uniform of his country, would hear a military band lull the sun to sleep. It would hurt, but he wondered if it were not worth the hurt. A smart sergeant of marines, in passing, cast one glance at the man who seemed always to wear epaulets, and brought his hand sharply to salute. The act determined Swanson. He had obtained the salute under false pretenses, but it had pleased, not hurt, him. He turned back and passed into the gate of the naval station.

From the gate a grass-lined carriage drive led to the waters of the harbor and the wharves. At its extreme end was the bandstand, flanked on one side by the cottage of the admiral, on the other by a sail loft with iron-barred windows and whitewashed walls. Upon the turf were pyramids of cannon balls and, laid out in rows as though awaiting burial, old-time muzzle-loading guns. Across the harbor the sun was sinking into the coral reefs, and the spring air, still warm from its caresses, was stirred by the music of the band into gentle rhythmic waves. The scene was one of peace, order, and content.

But as Swanson advanced, the measure of the music was instantly shattered by a fierce volley of explosions. They come so suddenly and sharply as to make him start. It was as though from his flank a quick-firing gun in ambush had opened upon him. Swanson smiled at having been taken unawares. For in San Francisco he often had heard the roar and rattle of the wireless. But never before had he listened to an attack like this.

From a tiny white-and-green cottage, squatting among the four giant masts, came the roar of a forest fire. One could hear the crackle of the flames, the crash of the falling tree trunks. The air about the cottage was torn into threads; beneath the shocks of the electricity the lawn seemed to heave and tremble. It was like some giant monster, bound and fettered, struggling to be free. Now it growled sullenly, now it lashed about with crashing, stunning blows. It seemed as though the wooden walls of the station could not contain it.

From the road Swanson watched, through the open windows of the cottage, the electric bolts flash and flare and disappear. The thing appealed to his imagination. Its power, its capabilities fascinated him. In it he saw a hungry monster reaching out to every corner of the continent and devouring the news of the world; feeding upon tales of shipwreck and disaster, lingering over some dainty morsel of scandal, snatching from ships and cities two thousand miles away the thrice-told tale of a conflagration, the score of a baseball match, the fall of a cabinet, the assassination of a king.

In a sudden access of fierceness, as though in an ecstasy over some fresh horror just received, it shrieked and chortled. And then, as suddenly as it had broken forth, it sank to silence, and from the end of the carriage drive again rose, undisturbed, the music of the band.

The musicians were playing to a select audience. On benches around the band-stand sat a half dozen nursemaids with knitting in their hands, the baby carriages within arm's length. On the turf older children of the officers were at play, and up and down the paths bareheaded girls, and matrons, and officers in uniform strolled leisurely. From the vine-covered cottage of Admiral Preble, set in a garden of flowering plants and bending palmettos, came the tinkle of tea-cups and the ripple of laughter, and at a respectful distance, seated on the dismantled cannon, were marines in khaki and bluejackets in glistening white.

It was a family group, and had not Swanson recognized among the little audience others of the passengers from the steamer and natives of the town who, like himself, had been attracted by the music, he would have felt that he intruded. He now wished to remain. He wanted to carry with him into exile a memory of the men in uniform, of the music, and pretty women, of the gorgeous crimson sunset. But, though he wished to remain, he did not wish to be recognized.

From the glances already turned toward him, he saw that in this little family gathering the presence of a stranger was an event, and he was aware that during the trial the newspapers had made his face conspicuous. Also it might be that stationed at the post was some officer or enlisted man who had served with him in Cuba, China, or the Philippines, and who might point him out to others. Fearing this, Swanson made a detour and approached the bandstand from the wharf, and with his back to a hawser-post seated himself upon the stringpiece.

He was overcome with an intolerable melancholy. From where he sat he could see, softened into shadows by the wire screens of the veranda, Admiral Preble and his wife and their guests at tea. A month before, he would have reported to the admiral as the commandant of the station, and paid his respects. Now he could not do that; at least not without inviting a rebuff. A month before, he need only have shown his card to the admiral's orderly, and the orderly and the guard and the officers' mess and the admiral himself would have turned the post upside down to do him honor. But of what avail now was his medal of honor? They now knew him as Swanson, who had been court-martialed, who had been allowed to resign, who had left the army for the army's good; they knew him as a civilian without rank or authority, as an ex-officer who had robbed his brother officers, as an outcast.

His position, as his morbid mind thus distorted it, tempted Swanson no longer. For being in this plight he did not feel that in any way he was to blame. But with a flaming anger he still blamed his brother officers of the court-martial who had not cleared his name and with a clean bill of health restored him to duty. Those were the men he blamed; not Rueu, the sergeant, who he believed had robbed him, nor himself, who, in a passion of wounded pride, had resigned and so had given reason for gossip; but the men who had not in tones like a bugle-call proclaimed his innocence, who, when they had handed him back his sword, had given it grudgingly, not with congratulation.

As he saw it, he stood in a perpetual pillory. When they had robbed him of his honor they had left him naked, and life without honor had lost its flavor. He could eat, he could drink, he could exist. He knew that in many corners of the world white arms would reach out to him and men would beckon him to a place at table.

But he could not cross that little strip of turf between him and the chattering group on the veranda and hand his card to the admiral's orderly. Swanson loved life. He loved it so that without help, money, or affection he could each morning have greeted it with a smile. But life without honor! He felt a sudden hot nausea of disgust. Why was he still clinging to what had lost its purpose, to what lacked the one thing needful?

"If life be an ill thing," he thought, "I can lay it down!"

The thought was not new to him, and during the two past weeks of aimless wandering he had carried with his service automatic. To reassure himself he laid his fingers on its cold smooth surface. He would wait, he determined, until the musicians had finished their concert and the women and children had departed, and then——

Then the orderly would find him where he was now seated, sunken against the hawser-post with a hole through his heart. To his disordered brain his decision appeared quite sane. He was sure he never had been more calm. And as he prepared himself for death he assured himself that for one of his standard no other choice was possible. Thoughts of the active past, or of what distress in the future his act would bring to others, did not disturb him. The thing had to be, no one lost more heavily than himself, and regrets were cowardly.

He counted the money he had on his person and was pleased to find there was enough to pay for what services others soon must render him. In his pockets were letters, cards, a cigarette-case, each of which would tell his identity. He had no wish to conceal it, for of what he was about to do he was not ashamed. It was not his act. He would not have died "by his own hand." To his unbalanced brain the officers of the court-martial were responsible. It was they who had killed him. As he saw it, they had made his death as inevitable as though they had sentenced him to be shot at sunrise.

A line from "The Drums of the Fore and Aft" came back to him. Often he had quoted it, when some one in the service had suffered through the fault of others. It was the death-cry of the boy officer, Devlin. The knives of the Ghazi had cut him down, but it was his own people's abandoning him in terror that had killed him. And so, with a sob, he flung the line at the retreating backs of his comrades: "You've killed me, you cowards!"

Swanson, nursing his anger, repeated this savagely. He wished he could bring it home to those men of the court-martial. He wished he could make them know that his death lay at their door. He determined that they should know. On one of his visiting-cards he penciled:

"To the Officers of my Court-Martial: 'You've killed me, you cowards!'"

He placed the card in the pocket of his waistcoat. They would find it just above the place where the bullet would burn the cloth.

The band was playing "Auf Wiedersehen," and the waltz carried with it the sadness that had made people call the man who wrote it the waltz king. Swanson listened gratefully. He was glad that before he went out, his last mood had been of regret and gentleness. The sting of his anger had departed, the music soothed and sobered him. It had been a very good world. Until he had broken the spine of things it had treated him well, far better, he admitted, than he deserved. There were many in it who had been kind, to whom he was grateful. He wished there was some way by which he could let them know that. As though in answer to his wish, from across the parade-ground the wireless again began to crash and crackle; but now Swanson was at a greater distance from it, and the sighing rhythm of the waltz was not interrupted.

Swanson considered to whom he might send a farewell message, but as in his mind he passed from one friend to another, he saw that to each such a greeting could bring only distress. He decided it was the music that had led him astray. This was no moment for false sentiment. He let his hand close upon the pistol.

The audience now was dispersing. The nursemaids had collected their charges, the musicians were taking apart their music racks, and from the steps of the vine-covered veranda Admiral Preble was bidding the friends of his wife adieu. At his side his aide, young, alert, confident, with ill-concealed impatience awaited their departure. Swanson found that he resented the aide. He resented the manner in which he speeded the parting guests. Even if there were matters of importance he was anxious to communicate to his chief, he need not make it plain to the women folk that they were in the way.

When, a month before, he had been adjutant, in a like situation he would have shown more self-command. He disapproved of the aide entirely. He resented the fact that he was as young as himself, that he was in uniform that he was an aide. Swanson certainly hoped that when he was in uniform he had not looked so much the conquering hero, so self-satisfied, so supercilious. With a smile he wondered why, at such a moment, a man he had never seen before, and never would see again, should so disturb him.

In his heart he knew. The aide was going forward just where he was leaving off. The ribbons on the tunic of the aide, the straps on his shoulders, told Swanson that they had served in the same campaigns, that they were of the same relative rank, and that when he himself, had he remained in the service, would have been a brigadier general the aide would command a battleship. The possible future of the young sailor filled Swanson with honorable envy and bitter regret. With all his soul he envied him the right to look his fellow-man in the eye, his right to die for his country, to give his life, should it be required of him, for 90,000,000 people, for a flag. Swanson saw the two officers dimly, with eyes of bitter self-pity. He was dying, but he was not dying gloriously for a flag. He had lost the right to die for it, and he was dying because he had lost that right.

The sun had sunk and the evening had grown chill. At the wharf where the steamer lay on which he had arrived, but on which he was not to depart, the electric cargo-lights were already burning. But for what Swanson had to do there still was light enough. From his breast pocket he took the card on which he had written his message to his brother officers, read and reread it, and replaced it.

Save for the admiral and his aide at the steps of the cottage, and a bare-headed bluejacket, who was reporting to them, and the admiral's orderly, who was walking toward Swanson, no one was in sight. Still seated upon the string-piece of the wharf, Swanson so moved that his back was toward the four men. The moment seemed propitious, almost as though it had been prearranged. For with such an audience, for his taking off no other person could be blamed. There would be no question but that death had been self-inflicted.

Approaching from behind him Swanson heard the brisk steps of the orderly drawing rapidly nearer. He wondered if the wharf were government property, if he were trespassing, and if for that reason the man had been sent to order him away. He considered bitterly that the government grudged him a place even in which to die. Well, he would not for long be a trespasser. His hand slipped into his pocket, with his thumb he lowered the safety catch of the pistol.

But the hand with the pistol in it did not leave his pocket. The steps of the orderly had come to a sudden silence. Raising his head heavily, Swanson saw the man, with his eyes fixed upon him, standing at salute. They had first made his life unsupportable, Swanson thought, now they would not let him leave it.

"Capt. Swanson, sir?" asked the orderly.

Swanson did not speak or move.

"The admiral's compliments, sir," snapped the orderly, "and will the captain please speak with him?"

Still Swanson did not move.

He felt that the breaking point of his self-control had come. This impertinent interruption, this thrusting into the last few seconds of his life of a reminder of all that he had lost, this futile postponement of his end, was cruel, unhuman, unthinkable. The pistol was still in his hand. He had but to draw it and press it close, and before the marine could leap upon him he would have escaped.

From behind, approaching hurriedly, came the sound of impatient footsteps.

The orderly stiffened to attention. "The admiral!" he warned.

Twelve years of discipline, twelve years of recognition of authority, twelve years of deference to superior officers, dragged Swanson's hand from his pistol and lifted him to his feet. As he turned, Admiral Preble, the aide, and the bare-headed bluejacket were close upon him. The admiral's face beamed, his eyes were young with pleasurable excitement; with the eagerness of a boy he waved aside formal greetings.

"My dear Swanson," he cried, "I assure you it's a most astonishing, most curious coincidence! See this man?" He flung out his arm at the bluejacket. "He's my wireless chief. He was wireless operator on the transport that took you to Manila. When you came in here this afternoon he recognized you. Half an hour later he picks up a message—picks it up 2,000 miles from here—from San Francisco—Associated Press news—it concerns you—that is, not really concerns you, but I thought, we thought"—as though signaling for help, the admiral glanced unhappily at his aide—"we thought you'd like to know. Of course, to us," he added hastily, "it's quite superfluous—quite superfluous, but——"

The aide coghed apologetically. "You might read, sir," he suggested.

"What? Exactly! Quite so!" cried the admiral.

In the fading light he held close to his eyes a piece of paper.

"San Francisco, April 20," he read. "Rueff, first sergeant, shot himself here today, leaving written confession theft of regimental funds for which Swanson, captain, lately court-martialed. Money found intact in Rueff's mattress. Innocence of Swanson never questioned, but dissatisfied with findings of court-martial has left army. Brother officers making every effort to find him and persuade return."

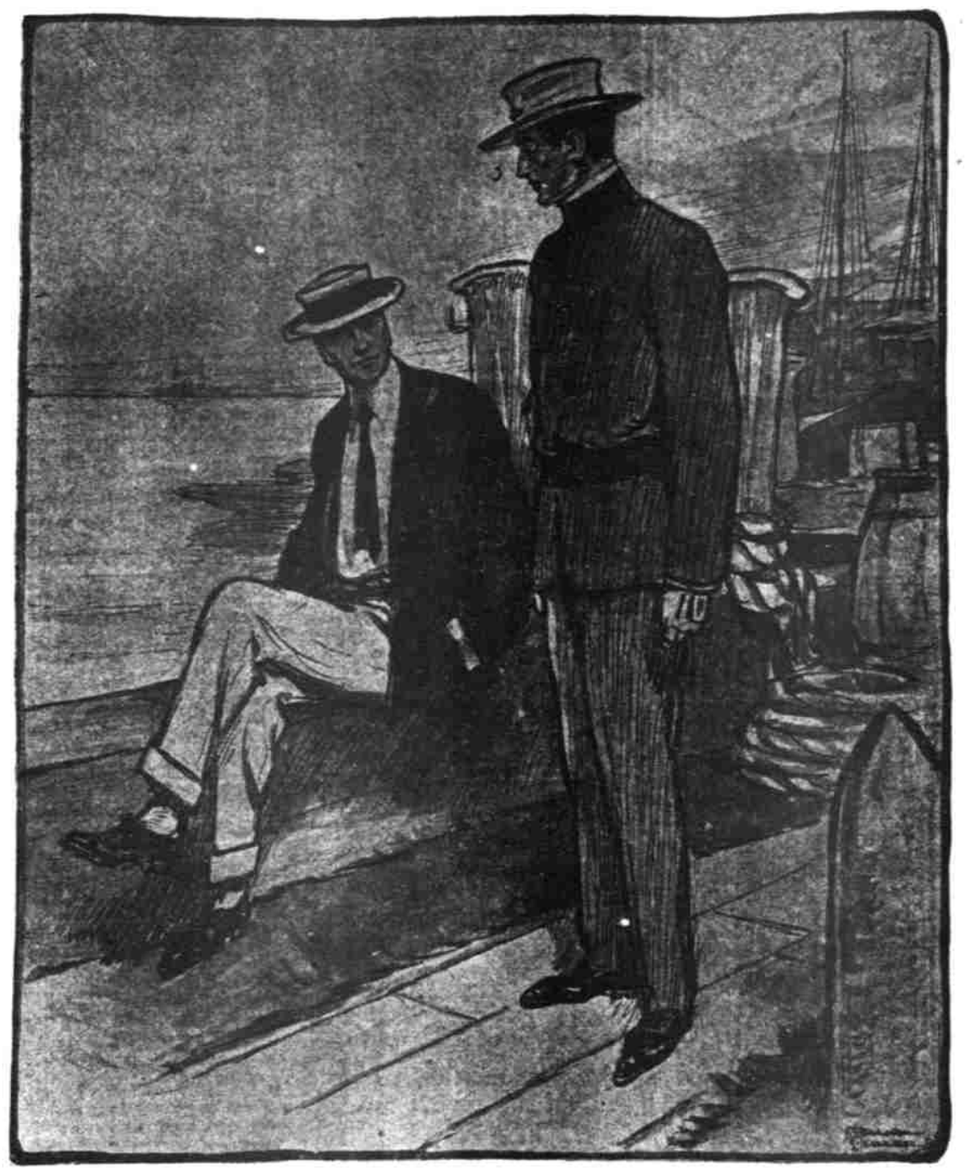
The admiral sighed happily. "And my wife," he added, with an impressiveness that was intended to show he had at last arrived at the important part of his message, "says you are to stay to dinner."

Abruptly, rudely, Swanson swung upon his heel and turned his face from the admiral. His head was thrown back, his arms held rigid at his sides. In slow, deep breaths, like one who had been dragged from drowning, he drank in the salt, chill air. After one glance the four men also turned, and in the falling darkness stood staring at nothing, and no one spoke.

The aide was the first to break the silence. In a polite tone, as though he were continuing a conversation which had not been interrupted, he addressed the admiral. "Of course, Rueff's written confession was not needed," he said. "His shooting himself proved that he was guilty."

Swanson started as though across his naked shoulders the aide had drawn a whip.

In penitence and gratitude he raised his eyes to the stars. High above his head the strands of the wireless, swinging from the towering masts like the strings of a giant aeolian harp, were swept by the wind from the ocean. To Swanson the sighing and whispering wires sang in praise and thanksgiving.



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